

# The Tupelo Homesteads: New Deal Agrarian Experimentation

*By Fred C. Smith*

The Natchez Trace Parkway meanders for more than 400 miles from Natchez to near Nashville. Along the way travelers may stop and read about events of the prehistoric and frontier history of the area. Interpretive signs point out locations of a treaty-signing by Native diplomats and immigrant war-lords, a clash between Native American nations and European empires, or just a popular “stand.” Colorful brochures are available that intrigue with their references to warfare, banditry, whiskey, and murder, all part of the romance of the Trace.<sup>1</sup>

It is good that we have this well-maintained, well-researched, and well-articulated commentary. However, undocumented and in the shadows, unheralded by signs and unnoticed by travelers is a provocative and well-preserved physical testament—an artifact of an era not so far gone—to an effort to assuage the consequences of arguably the bleakest period of our history, the Great Depression.

When Franklin D. Roosevelt assumed the office of president on March 4, 1933, the Depression threatened to devour America, and he promised “to take action and take action now.”<sup>2</sup> Within the first hundred days, his administration drafted and submitted fifteen major pieces of legislation. In almost unheard of celerity, Congress passed the measures and thus changed the fundamental nature of the American political economy. The

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<sup>1</sup> *Stand* was the local contemporary terminology for an inn or tavern. *Natchez Trace Parkway: Official Map and Guide* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, reprint 1999), passim; *Natchez Trace Parkway: A Well-Worn Path That Leads to New Adventures* (Jackson: Mississippi Department of Economic and Community Development, revised September 1991), passim.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal: The Age of Roosevelt* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), 1.

American government would henceforth be a managing partner in American economy and society.<sup>3</sup> Born at the confluence of three distinct New Deal efforts at Tupelo, Mississippi, and emerging from a confusing cloud of alphabetized agencies, the Tupelo Homesteads stand today as a silent articulation of the highly experimental and risk-taking efforts of the New Deal.

The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), signed into law in 1933, was FDR's answer to the industrial decline. Adopting almost "Hooveresque" ideas, the act allowed businesses to free themselves of anti-monopoly restrictions by creating and adhering to industry-wide codes governing pricing, wages, and production. In exchange for relaxed restrictions, industrialists were to shorten the work week so that more people could maintain jobs, sustain current wage scales, and accept industry-wide pricing schedules. Oddly, the first New Deal reference to agrarian planning came not within the Agricultural Adjustment Act, which was specifically enacted to further agrarian interests, but within the NIRA.

President Roosevelt believed that part of the answer to the nation's industrial doldrums lay in revitalized farm income. As farm income grew, he reasoned, farmers would buy more industrial products. His own experience as governor of New York and his consultations with agricultural economists M. L. Wilson of Montana State University and Rexford Tugwell of Columbia University convinced him that an entirely new class of producer/consumer could speed industrial recovery. Industrial workers and other wage earners could greatly increase their disposable income by growing a significant portion of their food on small homesteads. The president envisioned a new class of American consumer/producer emerging from urban centers or from non-productive farms. They could go "back to the land" with the assistance of the federal government and begin producing for their own needs while buying the products of American industries. In April 1933 FDR wrote Republican senator George Norris of Nebraska about his desire to have Congress enact "... one more bill which would allow us to spend \$25 million this year to put 25,000 families on farms at an aver-

<sup>3</sup> David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 119-24; Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 1-25. A historical panorama of economic planning to the beginning of the New Deal is found in Paul Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959), Chapters 2 and 3, pp. 37-89.

age cost of \$1,000 per family.”<sup>4</sup> (The president, as events clearly showed, was abysmally wrong in his estimation of the cost of resettlement.) Some of the president’s ideas meshed with those of Alabama senator John H. Bankhead. On March 9, 1933, Bankhead introduced a bill to establish a national subsistence homestead program, but, despite support from the president, the bill died in committee. Undeterred, Bankhead attached a subsistence homesteads provision to the National Industrial Recovery Act. The homesteads provision passed without discussion or opposition.<sup>5</sup>

Section 208, Title II, of the NIRA, approved June 16, 1933, appropriated \$25 million to “. . . provide for aiding the redistribution of the overabundance of population in industrial centers” and granted the president authority to set up agencies for “. . . making loans for and otherwise aiding in the purchase of subsistence homesteads.”<sup>6</sup> This section of the NIRA represented the culmination and synthesis of several strands of economic, social, and agrarian planning.<sup>7</sup>

Acting under authority granted in the act, President Roosevelt assigned the homesteads project to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes. Ickes, in turn, established within his department the Division of Subsistence Homesteads (DSH), and convened an advisory committee chaired by Senator Bankhead. The committee held its first meeting on September 26, 1933, and developed a fifteen-point recommendation for use of the appropriated funds. The first two recommendations are of particular interest in conducting an analysis of the Tupelo Homesteads. The first provision classified the need for a *demonstration* project as urgent. The projects were to “. . . ‘point the way to a program of a *permanent* character.’” They were to reconcile the problems of the industrial worker and American agriculture with *experimental* projects; such reconciliation would “. . . ‘*point the way*

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Donald Holley *Uncle Sam's Farmers: The New Deal in the Lower Mississippi Valley*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 26. For evidence of Wilson's familiarity with FDR's notions and New York programs, see M. L. Wilson, “A Land Use Program for the Federal Government,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 15 (April 1933): 217-35.

<sup>5</sup> Holley, 26-27; Conkin, 132-36; John H. Bankhead, “The One Way to Permanent Recovery,” *Liberty Magazine* (July 22, 1933):18.6 *Monthly Labor Review* (July 1933): 75.

<sup>6</sup> Holley, 26.

<sup>7</sup> The literature on the development of planning and its various stages of experimental implementation is enormous. By the time of the Great Depression many varieties of agricultural, land-use, and industrial planning existed. See Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*.

out.” The second provision of particular interest called for the demonstration projects to be located in, “. . . *problem areas* of the United States and not on the basis of allocations of funds on the basis of States, the projects to be selected . . . as to the *individual soundness and merit*” [italics added].<sup>8</sup>

Almost simultaneously another group of projects often identified with the DSH was coming to fruition. Harry Hopkins, head of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), began efforts toward a program that eventually led to the amalgamation of all subsistence projects under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Within the space of a few years, the administration transferred the projects funded by Section 208 of NIRA to the Resettlement Administration (RA), linking them with the much larger Rural Rehabilitation projects. As a result of such linkage and identification, however, the DSH-initiated programs were later evaluated and criticized using criteria that were not part of their origin or intent. Therefore, although it had trouble enough of its own without borrowing from other agencies, DSH was charged with failing to meet objectives it was not designed to meet.<sup>9</sup>

The New Deal legislation enacted in the spring of 1933 reflected contradictory notions about, and aspirations of, a revitalized agrarian community. Under the energetic and imaginative Hopkins, FERA established as a part of its rural rehabilitation efforts a program of subsistence homesteads, designed to help farmers who already received relief by making them self-sufficient. In contrast, the earlier DSH programs had envisioned, with a very few exceptions, creation of a new economic entity that combined wage employment with agriculture.

The DSH required a particular type of client. Clarence E. Pickett, executive secretary of the American Friends Service Committee and a proponent of DSH, briefly described the ideal client:

<sup>8</sup> *Monthly Labor Review* (September 1933): 1327-328.

<sup>9</sup> After the RA began massive resettlement, the DSH projects seemed to be non-productive, and the residents seemed to be beneficiaries of government largesse. Most of the homesteaders led lives indistinguishable from their contemporaries; furthermore, the government had provided the homesteaders with modern conveniences, tools, and equipment that their contemporaries had to purchase. It seemed to full-time farmers that the homesteaders “piddled” around in their gardens, while the resettled farmers actually had to do farm work.

We must experiment with those who share the idealism of the movement, who have the capacity to respond to those ideals, who have a good deal of the pioneering spirit.<sup>10</sup>

DSH regulations denied participation in the homesteads to persons on relief rolls. The application for a subsistence homestead required that the successful applicant be an American citizen; living or normally living in an industrial center; over twenty-one years old; have an income sufficient to meet homestead payments; and not have an income sufficient to secure a loan for a home using orthodox financial instruments.<sup>11</sup> As a consequence of two government agencies serving dual clienteles but using the same terminology, the DSH projects later lost their specific identification and became, in the mind of the public, simply another New Deal welfare project.<sup>12</sup>

The DSH advisory committee identified three types of clientele and three types of proposed communities:

Homestead colonies established for industrial workers and located in the out-skirts of cities or large towns; rural settlements in which small industries or branches of large industries can be established; and agricultural settlements. The

<sup>10</sup> *Proceedings, National Conference on Subsistence Homesteads*, Dayton, Ohio (December 1933): 28. The movement to which Pickett referred was the conscious effort to stretch the purchasing power of wage income by raising a large portion of food needs on the homestead. The DSH distributed charts and graphs that illustrated the increased purchasing power of a family that practiced subsistence farming.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin P. Groves, "The Federal Subsistence Homestead Program" (M.A. thesis., University of Cincinnati, 1935.) An original of the application is appended to Groves's thesis.

<sup>12</sup> There was one exception that proved the rule. The DSH approved a very limited number of projects assisting impoverished farmers. The only project of this type ever completed, however, was the Richton, Mississippi, project. Other rural projects initiated by FERA became identified with Richton because of the inclusion of the rural rehabilitation and DSH under the umbrella of the Resettlement Administration (RA), created in 1935 under the direction of Rexford Tugwell. The Cumberland Homesteads, Crossville, Tennessee, also provided assistance to those on relief rolls. However, the Cumberland Homesteaders, in the main, had not been subsistence farmers but were "displaced" and "stranded" workers. If, indeed, the Arthurdale project (described later in this article) was the most controversial, it was simply because it was the most publicized. The Cumberland Homesteads was, and is, by far the most interesting. A very good account of the Cumberland project is found in United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Russell Lord and Paul H. Johnstone, eds., *A Place on Earth: A Critical Appraisal of Subsistence Homesteads* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1942), 82-96.

program will deal largely with city dwellers, stranded populations (i.e. those left jobless by the moving of local industries or the exhaustion of natural resources, as for instance coal and copper mines, sawmill workers, etc.), and farmers now working lands too poor to be profitable.

Each subsistence-homestead project will be established in accordance with the industrial and agricultural trends as they relate to the population problems of a given region or State.

Every undertaking will be regarded as experimental. The experiment is to test a method of living that may conserve the best of both urban and rural life, afford greater stability in family living and point the way to a more permanent adjustment for workers in the shorter hour week and part-time employment.<sup>13</sup>

Because the program was not intended to be a welfare effort and since homesteading represented a new economic endeavor, Roosevelt maneuvered to have it administered by the person he considered the best executive in Washington, the "old curmudgeon," Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes. Ickes, rarely finding a subordinate whom he liked, placed the program under M. L. Wilson, then the head of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) wheat section.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Monthly Labor Review* 37 (November 1933): 1328. Under the RA the "subsistence program" was expanded to include other populations, thus creating other types of communities.

<sup>14</sup> According to Ickes, the president told Gifford Pinchot, governor of Pennsylvania, that Ickes was "the greatest executive I have ever known." As Pinchot was looking to advance his own interests, he may have been ingratiating himself to Ickes. In spite of an attempt by the *Chicago Tribune* to implicate Ickes in a financial scandal, Ickes maintained a reputation for uncompromising honesty. The quotation in this note is from Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diaries of Harold L. Ickes: The First Thousand Days, 1933-1936* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), 163. Ickes was an unfortunate choice as administrator in ultimate authority for the subsistence homestead program. He was authoritarian; if his subordinates could not immediately answer inquiries as to minuscule details, he immediately lost confidence in them. Ickes was also hyper-conservative about the distribution of federal funds; he was more than balanced on this issue by Harry Hopkins. M.L. Wilson left the Department of Interior shortly after arriving to become undersecretary of agriculture. In this post and with the cooperation of Rexford Tugwell, he exercised influence over the entire rural rehabilitation, subsistence homesteads, and resettlement programs when they were combined under the Department of Agriculture.

M. L. Wilson did not remain long as director of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads. By January 1934 differences with Ickes over the administration, control, and even the goals of DSH convinced Wilson of the need to work in some capacity free of Ickes's supervision. He took a position as assistant secretary (later under secretary) of agriculture. Fundamental differences regarding fiduciary propriety, local control, and community-building exacerbated pre-existing political, cultural and administrative differences between Wilson and Ickes. Wilson envisioned communities planned and directed under local guidance, answerable to Washington only on fundamental questions of policy and administration.<sup>15</sup>

Wilson constructed the fiduciary machinery of the DSH with an eye toward local control and direction. Under the laws of Delaware, the DSH established the Federal Subsistence Homestead Corporation (FSHC), a non-profit corporation, with stock held in trust by Secretary of the Interior Ickes. Under Wilson's plan, each new community would be planned, built, and administered by a local subsidiary corporation. By using the members of the local corporation to acquire and dispose of land and buildings and contract with borrowers, architects, and builders, the projects would be assured of local involvement and support. Wilson believed that such high-profile local involvement would also serve to differentiate the subsistence projects from the relief efforts of the Public Works Administration (PWA) and FERA.<sup>16</sup>

Ickes, on the other hand, viewed local control as an opportunity for graft and waste. There had been no hint of financial scandal in the Interior Department's PWA; Ickes believed in close scrutiny and multi-level approval of any expenditure. The ability of local organizations to select sites, hire architects, and spend money without the line-by-line approval of national authorities alarmed Ickes and provoked his suspicions. Historian Paul Conkin, the recognized authority on the New Deal community programs, argues that Ickes's fiduciary extremism, basic distrust of loosely supervised personnel, and insistence on intense micro-management was an extension of his previous career as a political reformist in Chicago. Conkin attributes Wilson's insistence on local control to his career in agriculture dealing with farmers. In a re-statement of the Hamiltonian-

<sup>15</sup> Conkin, 120.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-06.

Jeffersonian argument, Ickes trusted persons while Wilson trusted the people.<sup>17</sup>

Ickes received aid in controlling DSH from an unexpected and unappreciated source. Responding to President Roosevelt's ruling that all government corporations must have all accounts submitted, approved, and executed by standards and procedures mandated by the General Accounting Office, Comptroller-General John R. McCarl decreed on March 15, 1934, that all subsistence housing projects had to deposit all federal funds with the United States treasurer and use standard disbursing and accounting procedures. Ickes bristled at the ruling, interpreting it as McCarl's attempt to expand his influence at Ickes's expense. The Secretary of Interior used this ruling, however, to force Wilson to redesign his system of local control. Meanwhile, Charles Pynchon, Wilson's understudy at DSH, replaced him as director in January, 1934.<sup>18</sup>

By spring 1934 the Washington DSH office assumed almost all real control of the projects. Local corporations had to surrender their legal status, and the former board members reconvened as homestead associations. Only when a project was completed and ready for local ownership would a local corporation be formed. The local association still made recommendations stemming from their own investigations and field work, but all decisions, from choice of materials to the selection of applicants, required approval from various newly formed sections of the DSH. As a result, the planning, building, and occupation of the homesteads experienced delays, duplication, and confusion that plagued the DSH for the remainder of its short life.

As news of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads and its \$25 million appropriation spread around the country, funding requests, mainly addressed to President and Mrs. Roosevelt, inundated the DSH offices. In February 1934 loan requests totaled \$4.5 million. Real estate promoters, chambers of commerce, and individuals proposed particular schemes; others asked for loans to buy houses. From the mass of requests and applications the DSH had to decide, first, which projects deserved consideration and then which projects should be funded.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 93-130.

<sup>18</sup> Philip Glick, "The Federal Subsistence Program," *Yale Law Journal* 44: (June 1935): 1339-384; Ickes, 335; Conkin, 119.

<sup>19</sup> Conkin, 101-04.



By the end of October 1933 two projects had gained approval. The DSH made a \$50,000 loan to the Cooperative Production Units subsistence project already begun by the Council of Social Agencies in Dayton, Ohio. Ralph Borsodi, the council's advisor, had long been a promoter of "back to the land" subsistence communities. The initial loan of \$50,000 was the extent of assistance to the Dayton project, and it was the only project in which the government did not own the land.<sup>20</sup>

The second project funded by DSH was its most famous and most controversial. Operators had drastically curtailed mining operations in the bituminous coal fields of Appalachia as the surplus of American coal continued to glut national and international markets. The Interior Department acquired a 1,100-acre farm at Reedsville, West Virginia, and established Arthurdale, named for the former owner of the farm. The DSH approved plans for the farm to serve as a colony for 200 families. Adhering to the principles established by the DSH Advisory Committee, government personnel and community leaders subjected prospective clients to a series of application tests.<sup>21</sup>

Those applicants who passed the initial screening with high marks for agricultural ability, physical fitness, attitude, and ambition received in-home inspections. After further reducing the applications by eliminating persons with tuberculosis or negative attitudes about farm life, the applications of two hundred families gained approval from the increasingly bureaucratic and fragmented DSH administration. Approximately half the heads of households were unemployed coal miners, about one-fourth were former saw-mill workers, and the remaining one-fourth were Appalachian farmers. The DSH plans called for a modest house and roughly five acres of tillable land for each family. The DSH projected that each family would require an expenditure of about \$2,000. Eleanor Roosevelt took a particular interest in the Arthurdale Project. Unfortunately, her interest in seeing to the comfort of the families and her pressure to hurry along the project, along with the experimental nature of such project building, in fact produced delay (hastily assembled houses transported to the

<sup>20</sup> *Monthly Labor Review* (37): 1330. In some other projects, later popularly associated with DSH projects but not part of the DSH, the government did not own the land and provided only managerial services. A good example of this type of project was the Deshee Farm, Indiana. See Rebecca J. Thompson, "Deshee Farm: A New Deal Experiment With Cooperative Farming," *Indiana Magazine of History* 91 (1995): 380-406.

<sup>21</sup> *Monthly Labor Review*, 3: 1329; Conkin 108.

site were too flimsy for occupancy), waste, disorganization, and a resettlement cost to the DSH of over \$10,000 per family.<sup>22</sup>

Fears of local committees running amok and dispensing federal funds with a wholesome disregard for economy and fiducial propriety combined with Eleanor Roosevelt's aggressive interest in the DSH projects eventually caused Ickes to move toward divesting his department of responsibility for the subsistence homestead program. Whereas the president and Ickes had envisioned the houses at Arthurdale as sturdy but plain and lacking indoor plumbing or electricity, Eleanor Roosevelt, along with Wilson and project director Bushrod Grimes, aimed for more personal conveniences, insisting on indoor plumbing and electricity. In November 1933 the DSH had confidently predicted that houses at Arthurdale would be occupied at a cost between \$2,000 and \$3,000 each. By March 1934 Grimes revised his cost estimate: each occupancy would cost over \$10,000. President Roosevelt advised Ickes that the DSH "... could justify the cost because it was a model for other homestead projects," and Ickes responded by asking, "... what it was a model of, since obviously it was not a model of low-cost housing for people on the very lowest rungs of the economic order."<sup>23</sup> Even the March 1934 estimates were low; the final cost for each of the homesteads at Arthurdale was \$16,635. In 1935 the DSH transferred responsibilities to the Resettlement Administration under the direction of Rexford G. Tugwell.<sup>24</sup>

Under the provision for "stranded populations," the DSH established three other projects in addition to Arthurdale: Cumberland Homesteads near Crossville, Tennessee; Tygart Valley Homesteads, outside Elkins, West Virginia; and Westmoreland Homesteads at Greensburg, Pennsylvania. Each planned for 250-300 units and stretched the bounds of orthodoxy in the DSH advisory committee's directive. These proved the most problematic, expensive, and criticized of all DSH projects. It is interesting to note that the January 1935 *Monthly Labor Review* listed the designation of the Arthurdale project as "experimental" rather than "stranded populations."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Monthly Labor Review* 37: 1330; Ickes, 152.

<sup>23</sup> Ickes, 152.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*; Conkin, 153-53; 332.

<sup>25</sup> Conkin, 108; *Monthly Labor Review* (January 1935): 22.

By March 1, 1935, the DSH had approved a total of forty-three projects. Of these however, only thirty-four were completed by the DSH. The DSH designated one as "experimental," one as "a resettlement community," three as "farm communities," one as "co-operative industrial," and one as a "Garden city for Negroes."<sup>26</sup> The experimental, stranded populations and farm communities were permissible under the advisory committee's guidance, but they were not at the center of the aspirations and visions of the architects and planners of the subsistence homestead movement. Twenty-four projects, all of them designated "industrial," best represented the hopes for a new economic entity and a reconciliation of agrarian and industrial dissonance.<sup>27</sup>

Of the twenty-four projects most representative of the ideas and the aspirations of President Roosevelt, M. L. Wilson, Rexford Tugwell, and others, six were located in Mississippi. In addition to the only fully completed DSH farm community at Richton, five industrial projects for Mississippi gained approval: Hattiesburg, Laurel, Meridian, McComb, and Tupelo. The DSH never began construction on the Laurel project.

On December 15, 1933, the DSH announced plans for a twenty-five-unit complex for Tupelo. The local board of directors of the Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi, a subsidiary of the Federal Subsistence Homestead Corporation (FSHC), represented the top echelon of community leadership. Its members included R.V. Road, V. S. Whitesides, J. H. Leonard, L. A. Olsen, Mrs. T. F. Elkin, J. E. Redus, L. T. Wesson, J. M. Thomas, Jr., and Tupelo mayor J. P. Nanney. Operating under the original provisions of M. L. Wilson's management and organizational system, the board took action to identify quickly and place under option likely plots of land

<sup>26</sup> Groves, Appendix, 14. Conkin classifies Arthurdale as a "stranded community." This phrase is probably a more accurate reflection in operational terms, but it contradicts the DSH terminology. Part of the story of Arthurdale involves the attempt to establish a factory with a contract with the U.S. Postal Service as a source of employment for the homesteaders. This provision met with opposition from representatives of furniture manufacturing areas. The Jersey Homesteads, another "stranded population" community, was able to develop its own commercial textile operation, taking advantage of the skills of the homesteaders who, in the main, had been employed in that industry.

<sup>27</sup> *Monthly Labor Review* (January, 1935): 19-37; Groves, Appendix, 14; Conkin, 332-34.

ranging in size from 160 to 650 acres on which to build the proposed homesteads.<sup>28</sup>

Two of the options granted but not exercised are of particular interest. Glenn McCullough granted an option to Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi. Almost seventy years later, McCullough's grandson, also named Glenn McCullough, who served as mayor of Tupelo 1997-1999, accepted a position on the Board of Directors of the Tennessee Valley Authority; in 2001 he became chairman. Bel-Air Golf Course, now owned by the city of Tupelo, was once the Tupelo Country Club. On January 5, 1934, the Tupelo Country Club optioned its real estate to the Federal Subsistence Corporation for \$19,000. The membership voted that, should the option be exercised, it would build a new club. The Tupelo Homestead Corporation did not exercise that option, and there is no language in the minutes to indicate whether the option granted was motivated by financial difficulties or the desire for a new club.<sup>29</sup>

On March 26, 1934, the Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi purchased property from W. W. and W. M. Thompson. The property consisted of 170.58 acres of land six miles north of Tupelo and bisected by the newly-constructed U.S. Highway 45. The acreage, consisting of Pheba silt loam

<sup>28</sup> Record Group 79, Department of Agriculture, Resettlement Administration, Management Division, file DO6619114-L14, "Summary and Justification: Tupelo Homesteads, SH-MS-6," February, 18, 1934, National Archives and Records Administration, Atlanta, Georgia. The composition of the Board of Directors changed throughout the corporation's brief existence. Resignations occurred with regularity, possibly because of the change in administration caused by Comptroller General McCarl's ruling and Ickes's desire to gain more centralized control. See V. S. Whitesides's letter to I. B. Bradshaw, March 6, 1934; W. F. Trapp, associate community manager, to J. B. Lawson, assistant regional director, Resettlement Administration, June 21, 1937.

<sup>29</sup> RG 79, NARA, Atlanta, copies of options granted; *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*, November 23, 1999; RG 79, 86-28-6-(300) "Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Stockholders of Tupelo Country Club," NARA, Atlanta. The options taken by the Tupelo Homestead Corporation reflect the quality of real estate desired. The Bel-Air area was and currently is a very desirable section of the city. This is, perhaps, an indication that the members of the board did not view potential homesteaders as welfare recipients. They did not view the potential homesteaders as people who would drive down property values or create unpleasant neighborhoods. Likewise, the McCullough property optioned was then and is now very valuable and desirable real estate in Tupelo. In the 1960s the Tupelo Country Club did establish a new golf course. With only limited information, one could assume that the delay of some thirty years in building a new club indicates that the club optioned its property in hopes of improving its financial condition rather than to satisfy a desire for a new club.

soil, well adapted to garden, truck [VEGETABLE?] and fruit, contained quite a bit of timber. At twenty dollars an acre, it was a good buy.<sup>30</sup>

The Thompson purchase proved to be an administrative headache. Shortly after the parties executed the contract, one of Thompson's neighbors challenged the sale on the basis that the land in question included a small portion which belonged to him, not Thompson. The law firm of Deavours and Hilbun represented the DSH and, through a barrage of letters to and from the Thompsons, finally gained a "no objection" statement from the attorney general to their commencement of construction on May 10, 1935.<sup>31</sup>

There remained a degree of uncertainty about the budget of the Tupelo Homesteads project throughout its life. Figures submitted to the DSH fluctuated as construction manager C. T. Ames waffled between building twenty-two, twenty-five, or thirty-five units. Finally, Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi submitted a budget of \$58,350 and received approval for "... the development and the perfection of a Demonstration in Subsistence Homestead Gardening to be located adjacent to the corporate limits of the City of Tupelo, County of Lee, Mississippi."<sup>32</sup> After approval, Ames requested further modifications to the Tupelo Homesteads budget. I. R. Bradshaw explained to Washington officials that the \$58,350 budget was "apparently arbitrarily set" and that the Tupelo Homesteads should have no trouble qualifying for \$75,000.

During the period of wrangling over the budget and examination of the property title, DSH officials evidently worried about losing popular sup-

<sup>30</sup> RG 79, V. S. Whitesides's letter to I. R. Bradshaw, March 6, 1934; W. C. Inzer, Lee County extension agent, to I.R. Bradshaw, January 13, 1934. Of the almost 171 acres, 114 acres were purchased at \$20. The remaining 56 acres cost \$50 per acre.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., Thomas K. Shuffig, Office of the Attorney General, to Paul D. Shriver, Chief Counsel Division of Subsistence Homesteads, May 10, 1935; J. B. Lawson, project manager, to "Deavours and Hilbun," April 13, 1935; "Inter-Office communication, Charles E. Pynchon to J. B. Lawson, December 18, 1934; W. W. Thompson to V.S. Whitesides, March 14, 1934. The communications cited above and many others not cited reveal severe administrative problems. In addition to contested ownership was the mistaken notion that part of the land represented a portion of the Thompson homestead. This matter was not fully resolved until 1937. No evidence exists that this lack of resolution had any deleterious effect on the individual residents' attitudes about, or plans concerning, the homesteads.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., "Schedule XVI"; J. B. Lawson to S. N. Perkins, assistant chief, DSH, June 23, 1934.

port. Bradshaw telegraphed N. S. Perkins, assistant chief of the construction section:

In my opinion Lawson will go through successfully under revised budget June twentythird [*sic*] please approve this and lets get the houses started STOP We are fast losing public sentiment on account delay [*sic*].<sup>33</sup>

*The Tupelo Journal* ran a glowing account of the efficiency and economy practiced by Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi and the Division of Subsistence Housing. The newspaper noted:

Although the fact has not been officially announced, it is learned that a considerable portion of the \$80,000 appropriation for the Tupelo project will be turned back to the government. It is officially learned that the Tupelo Homestead has been constructed at lower cost than expected.<sup>34</sup>

The newspaper was evidently not aware of the “sliding” budget for the Tupelo project. In the same article the *Journal* reported that officials in Washington were, “. . . loud in their praise for Jimmy Lawson,” the project director.<sup>35</sup> The newspaper was not aware of other communication from Washington. The DSH bluntly informed Lawson that if he had been:

. . . able to go through with the government purchasing materials and contracting labor, you could have had your houses half finished and still remained under budget. . . . Your overhead of \$4,500 is entirely out of line . . . .

The letter did go on to say that the blame could be placed on the DSH because “. . . we have dragged this project along with various regulations of different kinds until the overhead could not be cut.”<sup>36</sup> The various regulations reflected Ickes’s increasing concern about the fiscal and managerial integrity of DSH operations.

Despite the increasing bureaucratic minutiae incurred as a result of Ickes’s dismantling of Wilson’s streamlined protocols and the waffling over how many houses to build and where to place them on the property,

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., telegram from I. R. Bradshaw to N. S. Jenkins, June 25, 1934. Bradshaw telegraphed Jenkins from Laurel, Mississippi, where another project had been approved.

<sup>34</sup> *Tupelo Journal*, November 21, 1934.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> RG 79, SH-MS-6, I. R. Bradshaw’s letter to J. B. Lawson, June 25, 1934.

and notwithstanding the fluctuating proposed budget, the work proceeded at a remarkably fast pace. On July 18, 1934, Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi awarded a contract of \$50,600 to Tupelo Lumber Company for construction of twenty-five houses, septic tanks, and outbuildings. The houses, designed by local architect Frank Kincannon, were completed October 15.<sup>37</sup>

David O. Puckett owned the Tupelo Lumber Company; his son, David O. Puckett Jr., remembers the whirl of activity involved with the construction:

I had my own delivery truck, it wasn't new but it was mine and I remember making many a delivery of building supplies to the site. I was only fourteen at the time but I had been driving forever. I remember that during those days you couldn't hire a decent carpenter in Tupelo, we had all of them working for us.<sup>38</sup>

The New Deal's significant presence in Northeast Mississippi, or at least the promise of it, preceded the announcement of approval and construction of the Tupelo Homesteads. On October 27, 1933, the city of Tupelo signed an agreement with the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) contracting for power and mapping of a huge direct power transmission line. This agreement supplied Tupelo with a public relations slogan still used by the city to this day: "Tupelo, First TVA City." Then, as now, Tupelo gloried in the possibilities offered by this government business. The local newspaper reporter waxed enthusiastic; little journalistic objectivity colored his account:

The New Deal in-so-far as Tupelo and the surrounding trade territory are concerned is in a fairer way toward achievement than had been conceived in the minds of any, with the exception of the most optimistic, and, before the new year has hardly been ushered in, the long proposed reduced rates will apply to city and farm homes alike.

The subheading of the story promised the line would be in operation by February, and a smaller header promised a sixty-eight percent rate cut.<sup>39</sup> The TVA actually performed faster than it promised. On September 27,

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., "Summary and justification."

<sup>38</sup> David O. Puckett, Jr., interview by author, September 1, 1999, Tupelo. The tape recording is in the author's possession.

<sup>39</sup> *The Tupelo Journal*, October 31, 1933.

1934, before the Tupelo Homesteads were completed, the Tupelo Homesteads Corporation granted an easement to the TVA to supply electrical power to the homesteads.<sup>40</sup>

The confluence of these two New Deal programs, the DSH and the TVA, along with a third New Deal-generated project, proved to be an enormous boon to the Tupelo Homesteads. In the early 1930s, the Natchez, Mississippi, Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) began enlisting the aid of other chapters and interested groups to pressure the federal government to map and preserve the historic Natchez Trace. As a result of their efforts, the Emergency Legislation Act of June 1934 authorized initial construction funds. Further legislation in 1938 established the Natchez Trace Parkway as a national parkway under the National Park Service. The physical confluence of three separate strains of New Deal thought in Northeast Mississippi was, arguably, an indication of the importance and power of Congressman John Rankin and Senator Pat Harrison.<sup>41</sup>

With the creation of the TVA, the New Deal harvested the fruits of progressive labor. Tennessee Valley area representatives and progressives had supported ideas similar to the TVA for years. During the Great War, the United States Army had built a hydroelectric dam at Muscle Shoals, Alabama, on the Tennessee River in order to supply the armed services with weapons-grade nitrates. At the end of the war, the military, no longer needing the nitrate fixing facilities, mothballed the installation. The disposition of those facilities actuated a struggle between capitalistic entrepreneurs and progressive conservationists for control of the dam. Follow-

<sup>40</sup> RG 79, SH-MS-6, C. T. Ames, "Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi Inc."; Charles Pynchon letter to J. B. Lawson. As the project neared completion, under the new regulations imposed by Ickes, the local group was required to form a local corporation with different provisions than the one involved in initial planning and construction. The Tupelo Homesteads Corporation replaced Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi.

<sup>41</sup> Federal recalled records, NATR, Accession #290, Box 40, Natchez Trace Parkway Archives; "Natchez Trace Parkway Home Page," <http://www.nps.gov/natr/natrubdex.htm>, accessed October 14, 1999. For a discussion concerning Pat Harrison's value to FDR in congressional approval of New Deal legislation, see Martha M. Swain, *Pat Harrison: The New Deal Years* (Jackson: The University and College Press of Mississippi, 1975), passim; Chester H. Gray, "Putting More Muscle in the Shoals," *Bureau Farmer*, 3 (4) (December 1927), 12-13. Tupelo was also awarded other New Deal works projects, including a mattress factory and a meat packing facility. The meat packing facility processed cattle that the government purchased from drought-stricken Midwest cattlemen.



ing up on notions first advanced by Gifford Pinchot, Chief U.S. Forester under President Theodore Roosevelt, progressives led by Senator George Norris insisted that the shoals area of the Tennessee River and the hydroelectric dam built there redound to the good of man and the health of the environment. As head of the Senate Agriculture Committee, Norris occupied a key position from which to block acquisition of the shoals facilities by strictly commercial interests. When Henry Ford, seeing the commercial opportunities inherent in a hydroelectric facility, offered \$5 million for a project that had cost the government \$130 million, Norris said the committee's acceptance of the bid would "... amount to the greatest gift ever bestowed upon mortal man since salvation was made free to the human race."<sup>42</sup>

On April 10, 1933, the hopes of Norris and the old time progressives turned to substance. When FDR asked Congress for "legislation to create a Tennessee Valley Authority—a corporation clothed with the power of government but possessed of the flexibility and initiative of private enterprise," Congress enacted the legislation on May 18, 1933.<sup>43</sup>

At about the same time that Congress created TVA, the DSH gave a description of the proposed Tupelo homesteads:

... a house and outbuildings located upon a plot of land on which can be grown a large portion of the foodstuffs required by the homestead family. It signifies production for home consumption and not for commercial sale. In that it provides for subsistence alone, it carries with it the corollary that cash income must be drawn from some outside source. The central motive of the subsistence homestead program, therefore, is to demonstrate the economic value of a livelihood which combines part-time wage work with part-time gardening or farming.<sup>44</sup>

The Tupelo Homesteads' construction adhered to the proscription. The community initially consisted of twenty-five houses on lots averaging a little over three acres each and included nine three-room houses, eight four-room houses, and eight five-room houses. Each house received water

<sup>42</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), 134-39; quotation from Tennessee Valley Authority, "A History of the Tennessee Valley Authority," 50th Anniversary Edition, 6, no publication data given.

<sup>43</sup> Tennessee Valley Authority, 17.

<sup>44</sup> Conkin, 110-11.

from a deep well that was equipped with an electric pump capable of delivering 225 gallons per hour and a pump-house enclosing the mechanism. As the planners anticipated that each homesteader would keep a cow, chickens, and hogs, each unit came equipped with a cow stall, chicken run, and hog pen. The DSH provided each homestead with fruit trees, berry bushes, farming equipment, fertilizer, seed, a cow, two shoats, and twenty-five chickens. Project managers made arrangements with the DSH, the County Extension Service, and Mississippi State College to provide guidance in gardening, canning, and the preservation of food. Each kitchen came furnished with a pressure cooker—a relatively new innovation—and supplies for home canning.<sup>45</sup>

Unlike most of the other industrial homesteads, Tupelo Homesteads had running water, electricity, and single-party phone lines. The Homesteads were near enough to Tupelo for the children of the community to utilize the transportation facilities of the Tupelo Municipal School District. Likewise, proximity to Tupelo precluded the need for construction of community cultural, medical, and religious facilities. Construction crews built an earthen dam across a ravine, creating a recreational lake for the homesteaders.<sup>46</sup>

On Friday, November 16, 1934, the first homesteaders moved into their new homes. Two days later, the president and Eleanor Roosevelt, along with Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, came to Tupelo; the president came to extol the virtues of the TVA and Mrs. Roosevelt to visit the homesteaders. Before speaking to an estimated 75,000 people at Robbins Field in Tupelo, the party visited the Tupelo Homesteads.<sup>47</sup>

Prior to the visit, the Tupelo Garden Club had extended an invitation to Mrs. Roosevelt to speak at a special meeting in her honor, which she declined. Knowing of her interest in the Arthurdale Project and wanting to honor the First Lady, the women of the Garden Club carefully prepared and decorated two of the vacant homesteads for her inspection. Mrs. Roosevelt, however, insisted on visiting a homestead family. She stopped, at random, at Number 20, the Barron residence, and Mrs. Roosevelt became so engrossed in conversation with Mrs. Barron and in examining

<sup>45</sup> RG 79, SH-MS-6, Schedule XVI; Ames, 1-2.

<sup>46</sup> RG 79, SH-MS-6, Schedule XVI; Ames 2-4. The dam broke in the early 1960s and was not repaired.

<sup>47</sup> *Tupelo Journal*; *Daily Clarion Ledger*; *New York Times*; *Commercial Appeal*, all of November 19, 1934; Ickes, 226.

the house and the appliances that she strained the patience of the president. FDR, waiting impatiently in his car, sent one of his staff members to “fetch her.”<sup>48</sup>

FDR’s visit constituted the high point of the Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi. Contrary to expectations, none of the initial residents bought their homes. They thought the price the government placed on the project too high, and they did not fully understand that they were expected to buy shares in the entire corporation and that only after the liquidation of seventy-five percent of the aggregate debt had been paid would they receive title to their property in fee-simple. The project passed with bewildering rapidity to the control of other government agencies, and with such transfer became associated with New Deal welfare programs. By 1937 the homesteads had become a place to rent until one could make better arrangements.

By the president’s own hopes and the DSH standards, Tupelo, Mississippi, was not an ideal place to nurture the aspirations of the economically challenged via this type of governmental assistance. When FDR outlined the homestead program to Congress, he spoke of potential clients who earned from \$600 to \$1,000 per year. By providing a way for a person to buy a home at low interest rates (three percent) on long terms (forty years), the president expected that there would be a surfeit of qualified applicants. He was correct; there was a surplus of applicants. The president also talked about the fiscal and moral qualifications of applicants; he stressed that this was not a relief program. The government, he said, would recover all its money; the beneficiaries of this program were to be persons of good moral character, financial integrity, and strong work ethics.<sup>49</sup>

There were plenty of such people in Tupelo, but they were not likely to submit to regimented and standardized detail, nor were they likely to submit to ownership provisions at variance with fee-simple occupancy. Tupelo industries employed over 2,000 workers; thus, the per capita income for Tupelo and environs – most industrial workers did not live in the city – exceeded Mississippi norms. The average per capita income of the first homesteaders was actually between \$1,300 and \$1,900 per year.

<sup>48</sup> *Tupelo Journal*, November 19, 1934.

<sup>49</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Volume 2: *Year of Crises, 1933* (New York: Random House, 1938), 290-94. Originally, the DSH planned for forty-year mortgages; however, all actual agreements called for thirty-year amortization.

Contrary to the initial guidelines, every head of household in the Tupelo Homesteads held full-time employment. Even compared to the residents of other industrial projects established by DSH, many of which were located in far more prosperous regions than Tupelo, incomes of the Tupelo Homesteaders ranked among the highest. Of all the DSH projects, the Tupelo Homesteaders ranked fifth in terms of family income. Clearly, the Tupelo Homesteaders did not represent the clientele the president had originally envisioned.<sup>50</sup>

Applicants for homesteads at Tupelo underwent the same rigorous examinations as applicants for all DSH and RA subsistence projects. The homestead association forwarded applications to a committee of local volunteers, which forwarded selected applications back to the homestead association. The applications were then screened by the state committee chaired by I. B. Bradshaw and Anne Jordan, home management specialist at Mississippi State College. Finally, the national DSH Committee, chaired by Charlotte Smith, made the final selection.

Banks Livingston, a long-time Tupelo resident and local historian, remembers the Tupelo Homesteads and the attitude of the community toward the homesteaders. They were not, he said, thought of as being on relief; there was no stigma attached to being a homesteader. In fact, he thought, the community viewed the homesteaders as one might view contest winners. Times were tough; maybe they could make this pay off to their advantage. They might choose to stay there and they might not.<sup>51</sup>

Strangely, it was the devastating tornado of April 1936 that spelled doom for the Tupelo Homesteads. The tornado created a wide swath of destruction in Tupelo, demolishing hundreds of homes and businesses. The resulting building boom created a localized economic revival. Thousands of square feet of new home and apartment construction, much of it of higher quality than the Tupelo Homesteads, came on the market. The

<sup>50</sup> RG 79, "Summary and Justification"; Groves, 60. *The Tupelo Journal*, November 19, 1934, listed the initial homesteaders and their employment status. The newspaper listed James Barron as a part-time employee of the Nehi Bottling Company. However, Barron's application and occupancy contract listed his annual income as \$1,600 per year. It is likely that Barron worked a full week; if not, his income from part-time employment compared very favorably to full-time workers. There seems to have been some subterfuge with regard to some of the applicants' statements regarding financial resources. Many of the homesteaders, Mrs. Kathleen Perkins, for instance, owned other property.

<sup>51</sup> Banks Livingston, interview by author, November 10, 1999; the tape is in author's possession.

original homesteaders now had a better economic environment and more housing options.<sup>52</sup>

By 1937 the circumstances of the typical homesteader had changed. None of the original homesteaders contracted to buy their homes. Since many of the new residents replacing the original homesteaders were employees of the TVA and the National Park Service and were assigned to the Tupelo area on a temporary or rotational basis, they had no intention of buying their homes and therefore opted for month-to-month rental occupancy.<sup>53</sup>

The homesteaders were initially given two contract options. Contract A called for a two-year lease, after which time the homesteader was to pay twenty-five percent of the selling price of the homestead and begin mortgage payments. This sales price, not established until the local corporation assumed ownership of the entire project, was an item of contention. The two-year lease period was designed by the DSH to allow residents time to accumulate the down payment. Equally important, the two-year period was to serve as a sort of probationary period. Some homesteaders might prove unreliable or disruptive. The post-tornado building boom in Tupelo helped deflate the price of real estate. From 1936 to 1940, the local homesteaders were in constant conflict with the government over the fair market value of the properties.<sup>54</sup>

Contract B was a month-to-month rental agreement. Both contracts were non-binding on the homesteaders; only after entering into a purchase agreement were the homesteaders required to fulfill long-term obligations. None of the homesteaders exercised their purchase option, and

<sup>52</sup> Kathleen Perkins, interview by Sara Amy Leach and Leslie Blythe, April 17, 1977, transcript, Natchez Trace Parkway, General Files, Tupelo. Vaughn L. Grisham, Jr., *Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community* (Dayton: Kettering Foundation Press, 1999), 87, 134. The intense but short-term lack of housing created a barrage of letters to the Resettlement Administration from prominent Tupelo citizens and Congressman Rankin and Senator Harrison. The RA had approved an additional project for Tupelo in 1936, the Tupelo Industrial Garden Community, which was to provide seventy homes for white and thirty for black occupancy. Although land had been placed under option and the budget approved, the RA used the funds to help provide relief for farmers in the drought-stricken Midwest. The new Tupelo project was never built. See RG 83, Records of the Bureau of Agricultural Statistics, USDA Files, NARA, College Park, Md.

<sup>53</sup> RG 79, copies of applications, leases, and letters of inquiry; Perkins interview, Natchez Trace Parkway, General Files.

<sup>54</sup> RG 79, copies of applications, leases, and letters of inquiry; Natchez Trace Parkway, General Files.

thus the homesteaders were free to move at their convenience. The federal government had become, in effect, a tenant landlord.<sup>55</sup>

In May 1937 the Resettlement Administration (RA), which had taken over from the DSH, formed the Tupelo Homesteads Corporation to replace the defunct Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi, Inc., and authorized the newly formed association to buy the project for \$110,000. In view of the fact that the project had cost \$149,290, the RA administrators believed that they had offered the local corporation a very good deal. The local association turned it down. On October 1, 1938, after arguments, reappraisals, and reconsideration, the association finally agreed to purchase the project for \$73,182. In terms of 2003 real dollars, houses that had cost an average of \$49,988 to construct and equip were offered for sale by the RA for \$25,938.<sup>56</sup>

The Tupelo Homesteads Corporation had no more success with the project than had its federal predecessor. While vacancies were rare because of the low rents and the need for temporary quarters for workers involved in constructing the TVA and the Natchez Trace Parkway, no one, it seemed, cared to own a "subsistence homestead." The delays, regulations, and duplication of efforts actuated by the DSH insistence on centralized control removed the advantages available through local knowledge. The homesteaders found better construction at lower prices available in the community. Even by its own admission, the homesteads were inferior in materials and construction standards to homes available through the private sector.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> RG 79, copies of applications, leases, and letters of inquiry; Natchez Trace Parkway, General Files.

<sup>56</sup> Conkin, 334. As mentioned earlier in this article, the estimated budget for the Tupelo Homesteads was in the \$50,000 to \$80,000 range. Why the incredible discrepancy? Part of the answer is in the increased inefficiency that came as a function of more centralized control following the comptroller general's rulings and Ickes's micro-management. However, the biggest reason is that in 1936, under pressure from Tugwell, director of RA, ten additional units were built at Tupelo. These new units were technically not part of the DSH program but were designated as a "garden community" under the auspices of the RA. However, since they were situated on the property bought for the Tupelo Homesteads and since they were separated from the original houses only by U.S. Highway 45, they were added to the Tupelo Homesteads and offered to the association as part of the Homesteads. These ten houses, unlike the originals, are composed of brick veneer. They are obviously products of another mind-set regarding subsistence housing.

<sup>57</sup> Perkins interview; *A Place on Earth*, 47-49.

In late 1939 the National Park Service began conversations with the Tupelo Homestead Corporation concerning the Parkway's acquisition of the homesteads. The Tupelo project still experienced trouble with delinquencies, turnovers, and the continued lack of home buyers. The Parkway employees complained of high rents in Jackson; Tupelo was very near the center of the Trace. These two factors, coupled with the nature of the Tupelo Homesteads' occupancy problems, made the acquisition of the homesteads by the Park Service attractive. On October 31, 1940, the National Park Service assumed ownership of the Tupelo Homesteads and made them a part of the Natchez Trace Parkway. To accommodate the inclusion of the properties, surveyors diverted the path of the parkway eastward so that the property now fell within the path of the Trace.<sup>58</sup>

Transference to the National Park Service made relationships between landlord and tenants even more grievous. Tenants did not understand the new provisions imposed by the National Park Service. Since Park employees assumed priority, some tenants, even those who had invested in purchases for improvement of or in the homesteads, were asked to vacate their homes, even though other homes were vacant. Many tenants were not informed of the nature of the property; thus when B. M. Anthony and his wife were reprimanded for conducting target practice (on an oak tree) on their "property" they were not convinced that the park ranger, Claude A Wagner, Jr., had the authority to interfere and allowed that it was "none of his damn business, anyway." Ranger Wagner went on to inform Anthony that the Park Service would dictate to him what he could plant and that the efforts he made to enclose a cow and other animals were moot, since no farm animals would henceforth be allowed on Parkway property. After Ranger Wagner explained that the property was part of the National Park Service and that certain regulations regarding firearms were mandated by federal law, and after a soothing letter of explanation from acting superintendent Malcom Gardner, Anthony was somewhat mollified. However, Ranger Wagner, in his report of the incident to Gardner, indicated a certain appreciation of regional peculiarities and a bit of wariness about them: "Mr. Anthony is, I believe, a warm blooded

<sup>58</sup> Holley, 120; "Summary and Justification"; *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*; Banks Livingston interview; "Report on the Tupelo Homesteads, Lee County, Mississippi," January 29, 1940, Natchez Trace Parkway General Files; *Natchez Trace Parkway Bulletin*, Vol. 1, no. 1, June, 1940, Natchez, Miss.; *Natchez Trace Bulletin*, Vol. 1, nos. 2 & 3, November, 1940, and January, 1941, Jackson, Miss.

southerner, native to this region, and a firm believer in individual rights, and from his attitude I knew he resented being asked to stop his target practice. His letter more than sustains my analysis of his character and temperament.”<sup>59</sup>

The Natchez Trace also moved its headquarters to Tupelo. Workers from a “stub” (temporary satellite) Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp at Plantersville helped Parkway workers combine three of the houses to form office space, moved four dwellings to widen the road shoulders, and the Park Service retained fifteen as employee quarters. The surplus houses remained available for rent until the last of the pre-Trace acquisition renters vacated his house in 1953. Since 1953, all the remaining houses have been used by the Natchez Trace Parkway as employee quarters or for other administrative purposes.<sup>60</sup>

Title II of the National Industrial Recovery Act provided the funding for the creation of a new economic entity. The legislation, and the arguments in support of it, clearly established the peculiarities of this new industrial/agrarian/consumer order. The various regulations and program objectives of the New Deal quickly became the “scripture” of the new economic gospel, which attempted to reconcile American individualism with a new age of cooperation and communal activities. Like many other scriptures, the New Deal gospel also revealed inconsistencies. Rexford G. Tugwell, M. L. Wilson, but, most important, President Roosevelt himself envisioned a hybrid between yeoman farmers and industrial workers. The DSH expected such “new men” to work part-time in decentralized industries; provide a major part of their subsistence via home gardening and livestock husbandry; create a sense and reality of “community” among their neighbors; and commit their working lives toward the purchase of a subsistence homestead.<sup>61</sup>

The legislative and regulatory language clearly assumed that henceforth workers would experience a shorter work day and that industry would see the efficiencies and virtues of decentralization away from the

<sup>59</sup> B. M. Anthony to Malcom Gardner, acting superintendent, November 11, 1940; Memorandum to Mr. Smith from Claude A. Wagner, Jr., park ranger, November 13, 1940; other letters of complaint from tenants as well as the Anthony, Wagner, and Gardner communications, all in NATR Accession #290, Box 8, Folder 98, Natchez Trace Archives.

<sup>60</sup> *Natchez Trace Parkway Bulletin*, nos. 2 & 3; Date given by Craig Stubblefield, Natchez Trace Parkway, in conversation with author.

<sup>61</sup> *Monthly Labor Review* (July 1933): 75.



urban masses. The purpose of the NIRA, after all, was to rescue the industrial economy. Title II, from which the Division of Subsistence Homesteads sprang, was primarily crafted to increase the purchase of industrial products.

The “scripture” of Title II also mandated that the “new men” be perpetually balanced between economic prosperity and poverty. On the one hand, they were expected to be financially secure enough to execute a lifetime of mortgage payments; on the other hand, they could not have sufficient financial resources to qualify for traditional loans. Finally, the DSH mandated that this new economic entity sell its economic birthright; they were expected to be content with a “subsistence.” The term “subsistence,” despite its academic or technical definition (and perhaps because of the adjectives so often coupled with it – *meager, bare, niggardly*) meant, to most Americans, “just getting by.” It is interesting to note that FDR, in a speech to boys on a training farm, used the word “competence” to describe the good life. Words carry powerful psychological and emotional messages; their connotations often are more important than their definitions. “Competence” carried the notion of comfort, ease, and sufficiency, while “subsistence” bore the aroma of chronic hunger, desperation, and fragile existence. Thus, in the name of the agency itself, the Division of *Subsistence* Homesteads, and in its description of activities (“*subsistence* home gardening”) this New Deal “scripture” negated a major tenet of popular American theology: Americans still believed in the gospel of economic opportunity and prosperity. The Tupelo Homesteaders were asked to sell their economic birthright for the “mess of pottage”<sup>62</sup> of a subsistence. They did not.

A second inconsistency is found in the New Deal idea of a new producer/consumer economic entity. This concept was not new for Tupelo or any of the “new South” cities. The efficient coordination of industrial employment and subsistence gardening had been a key reason for Tupelo’s phenomenal success. By 1934 growing most of one’s own food was simply a normal part of the way of life, even for those holding full-time jobs. Only the aged, infirm, or incompetent (“sorry” in the vernacular of the area) did not have sizable gardens. Lorena Hickok, on one of her information-seeking tours, commented on this phenomenon at Tupelo. She told Harry Hopkins of interviewing a young textile worker in Tupelo. The young man

<sup>62</sup> Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for a mess of pottage, *Genesis* 25:30-34, KJV.

lived about three miles from Tupelo and drove to work every day. He told Hickok that he thought of his wages as “net profit,” since he raised almost all of what he needed back on his place. It was this profit that allowed him to buy the automobile he was driving. Wage work and subsistence farming already seemed to be a very common way of life in Tupelo, said Hickok. Thus the New Deal ideation that suggested that a new economic entity would soon emerge to shore up the industrial sector proved to be a negation: there was no such thing as a new type of producer/consumer. It had existed in Tupelo since the end of Reconstruction. The DSH program at Tupelo was patently not the *experiment* that the DSH scripture mandated. Perhaps the DSH chose Tupelo as a place for a *demonstration* project precisely because it was not experimental; Tupelo homesteaders already subscribed to the notion of subsistence farming.<sup>63</sup>

A third inconsistency that became quickly apparent at the Tupelo Homesteads was the assumption that the homesteaders would only have “part-time” employment. The Tupelo Homesteaders worked every hour they could and, as evidenced by household incomes, they worked full-time. Katherine Perkins, in the interview cited earlier, recalls that all heads of households at the Tupelo Homesteads held full-time jobs. Bearing in mind the president’s assurance that the subsistence homestead project was not a relief effort and that the homesteaders were to be financially able to pay mortgages or rents, the local, state, and national screening committees made sure that the Tupelo homesteaders were competent, responsible, and ambitious, but such people were not content to exist in bare subsistence. When opportunities arose for them to acquire better and more pleasing accommodations, they quickly abandoned the artificial community. Furthermore, the Tupelo Homesteaders were never comfortable with the assumption that they would automatically develop a sense of community at the homesteads. The right of free association appeared to be a prerequisite for community building. By establishing “industrial type” homesteads

<sup>63</sup> Vaughn L. Grisham, Jr., *Tupelo: Evolution of a Community* (Dayton: Kettering Foundation Press, 1999): passim (this source is good for information concerning wage-work and farming in Lee County, Mississippi); Lorena Hickok to Harry Hopkins, Harry L. Hopkins Papers, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York. Hickok told Hopkins that Tupelo’s experience with subsistence gardening and wage work began in 1923 when a local textile factory manager decided to hire only those who lived in the country and owned their own farms. Of the 2,000 industrial employees, only 700-800 actually lived in town. School buses performed double duty: they picked up and returned workers to the city factories and children to the city schools.

in Tupelo, Laurel, McComb, Meridian, and Hattiesburg, the DSH put in practice contradictions to its stated purpose. The language of Section 208, Title II, of the National Industrial Recovery Act enabled “. . . redistribution of *the overabundance of population in industrial centers*” [italics added]. By no stretch of the imagination were these Mississippi towns examples of overpopulation, and it would require a great stretch of the definition for any of them to be classified as industrial centers. Of the twenty-four industrial homesteads built in the United States, five of them, representing over twenty percent of the total, were located in, arguably, the least industrialized state with the fewest industrial workers. Perhaps the DSH sought to gain the political support of two powerful Mississippi congressmen, Representative John Rankin and Senator Pat Harrison.<sup>64</sup>

With the creation of the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration, the New Deal abandoned the notion of the transference of industrial workers to part-time agrarian status. Industry showed no propensity to decentralize and move segments of the production process from urban industrial centers. The RA and FSA programs were almost entirely concerned with the rehabilitation of full-time farmers; people soon forgot that the residents of the industrial homesteads were primarily wage-earners, not farmers.

Had the Great Depression continued with the same intensity as in the years 1929-1933, had the economy not shown definite signs of recovery in late 1936 and early 1937, and had the shortened work-week and peculiarities of a “pleasure economy” become an American fixture rather than a passing aberration, perhaps the revealed inconsistencies of the Tupelo Homesteads would have proven to be internal evidence of inspired revelation.

In order to affix blame for the failure of the DSH program one must know, in the now common expression of political chicanery, “What did the New Dealers know, and when did they know it?” We cannot be sure today of what they knew in 1934; we cannot even agree as to what they should have known. The DSH and its projects were the result of a frenzied, almost desperate effort to answer some of the challenges of the Great Depression. They were hastily established and implemented without the benefit of proper social and economic analysis. They did not achieve their

<sup>64</sup> Senator John H. Bankhead was also very powerful; hence the DSH built six of the homesteads in Alabama.

stated objectives, but they did perform at least one very important function for the New Deal: the DSH projects “broke the ice.” New government projects did not seem so “foreign” to the public. The government had “got its feet wet” with regard to resettlement and a planned economy. Whatever else we may say about these New Dealers, they “took action and action now.”

Today, even though the cleared fields have been overtaken by luxurious vegetation and the ordered orchards have disappeared, the houses of the Tupelo Homesteads look very much as they looked in the 1930s. In the mid 1950s the Park Service made some changes, primarily the addition or enclosure of porches and the addition of windows. The Tupelo Homesteads, along with the Cumberland Homesteads, are the only New Deal communities of the one hundred built that retain their architectural, structural, and environmental integrity. Park Service ownership kept the Tupelo Homesteads from being sold to individuals, thereby avoiding significant structural alteration.<sup>65</sup>

This neighborhood, quiet and secure, free from traffic, sits behind the Tupelo Visitors Center on the Natchez Trace Parkway. There are no signs informing passers-by of the genesis or philosophical motivations or the human drama associated with the Tupelo Homesteads; there is no information linking the Trace itself or the hidden houses to efforts of the government to help people endure the Great Depression. No sign marks the visit of the president or the First Lady at #20. There is no monument in the back yard of #7 to mark the grave site of a baby girl.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>65</sup> *National Register of Historic Places.*

<sup>66</sup> From a confidential interview, the interviewee, by last account (1999) is still living. The author sees no good reason for revealing his identity in view of the fact that such revelation serves no valid historical purpose and that such revelation would most likely revisit an area of intense emotional pain and guilt. It was illegal in the 1930s, as it is now, to privately bury corpses. Interview with anonymous source by Sara Amy Leach, transcript, Natchez Trace Parkway Archives, General Files. A copy of the transcript is retained by this writer.